

Lending an Ear

Why Leaders Must Learn to Listen Actively

The ability to listen effectively is an essential component of leadership. But many leaders, often unknowingly, fall short in this area. By learning the skills and behaviors of active listening—the willingness and ability to hear and understand—leaders can become more effective.

Many leaders take for granted their ability to listen to others. But they are often surprised to learn that their peers, direct reports, and bosses think that they don't listen well and that they are impatient, judgmental, arrogant, or unaware.

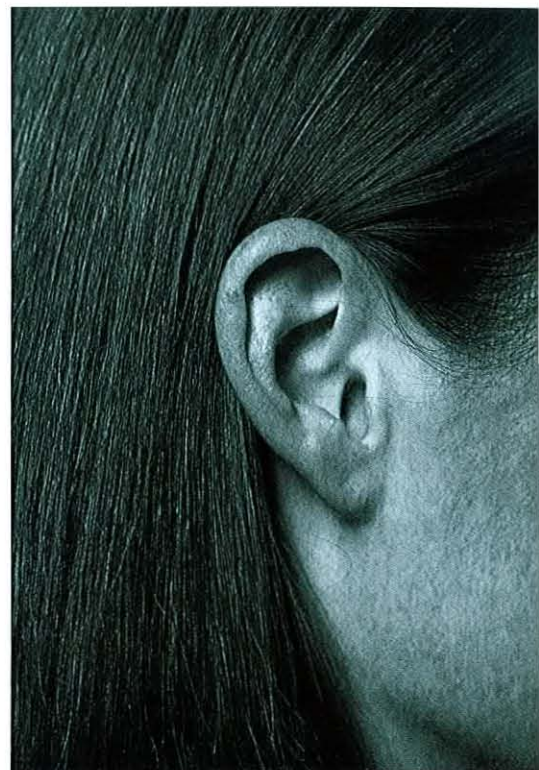
The ability to listen effectively is an essential component of leadership. Most leaders know they need to be good listeners to be effective, but even though they may have the best intentions, they don't know specifically what to do (or not to do) to become better listeners. By learning the skills and behaviors of *active listening*, leaders can become more effective.

Active listening is a person's willingness and ability to hear and understand. It is useful to think of active

listening as an exchange between people. On one level the quality of a conversation can be improved when one person is engaged in active listening. Leaders who practice active listening are able to draw out more and more meaningful information during a conversation. At its most engaging and effective, active listening is the norm for conversation, and everyone involved is a full participant. At this level it involves bringing about and finding common ground, connecting to each other, and being open to new possibilities.

SIX SKILLS

Active listening involves six skills: paying attention, holding judgment,

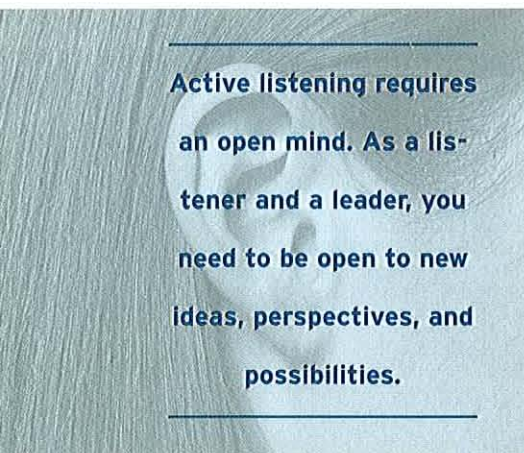


by Michael H. Hoppe

reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing. Each skill contributes to the active listening mind-set, and each includes various techniques or behaviors.

Paying Attention

A primary goal of active listening is to set a comfortable tone and allow time and opportunity for the other person to think and speak. By paying



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attention to your behavior and that of the other person, you create the setting for productive dialogue.

Adopt the frame of mind of a listener and learner. Be focused on the moment. Remember that your intention is to connect to and understand—not interrogate—the other person. Operate from a place of

respect, letting yourself empathize with the other person.

Maintain comfortable eye contact. Show interest. Maintain an open body position and posture. Give non-verbal affirmations. Nod to show that you understand. Indicate understanding and keep the other person talking.

Observing closely and hearing effectively require careful attention. Pay close attention to the other person's nonverbal and verbal behavior in order to pick up on and make sense of the important information it offers.

Holding Judgment

Active listening requires an open mind. As a listener and a leader, you need to be open to new ideas, perspectives, and possibilities. Even when good listeners have strong views, they suspend judgment, hold their criticism, and avoid arguing or trying to sell their point of view right away. Tell yourself: "I'm here to understand how the other person sees the world. It is not time to judge or give my view."

Holding judgment is particularly important when tensions run high. Let the other side vent or blow off steam if needed. Don't jump immediately to problem solving or offering advice. Be comfortable with remaining silent. Your main job is to listen and pay attention. This does not necessarily mean you agree; it shows that you are trying to understand.

Empathy—the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and temporarily live in that person's world—expresses your willingness to understand the other person's situation without passing judgment. For example, a leader might say, "I'd be excited too if I had such attractive options before me," or, "It must be really hard to make this choice." Empathy conveys respect for the other person and his or her views and experiences.

Leaders can show their genuine intention to be open-minded by saying something like, "I'm coming from another perspective and I want to understand your view," or, "My goal here is to understand, not to judge or make a decision."

Each person brings a unique perspective to a situation. Experience, culture, personal background, and current circumstances all contribute to the way people act and interact at work. Communicate that you would like to understand things through the other person's unique lens.

Slow your pace to allow the other person to talk and elaborate. Don't speed the conversation along. Allow pauses.

Reflecting

Like a mirror, reflect information and emotions without agreeing or disagreeing. Use paraphrasing—a brief, periodic recap of the other person's key points—to confirm your understanding. Reflecting the other person's information, perspective, and feelings is a way to indicate that you hear and understand. Don't assume that you understand correctly or that the other person knows you have heard. The ability to reflect the other person's content as well as feelings creates strong rapport and deepens the exploration.

Demonstrate that you are tracking the information presented by periodically restating the other person's basic ideas, emphasizing the facts. Responses such as, "What I'm hearing is . . ." or, "Let me make sure I understand what you're saying . . ." allow you to identify any disconnects and signal to the other person that you are getting it.

Identifying the emotional message that accompanies the content is equally important but often more challenging. Yet reflecting the other person's emotions is an effective way to get to the core of the issue. The emotional message may be contained

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael H. Hoppe is an enterprise associate at CCL. He holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of North Carolina.



in the words used, the tone of voice, the body language, or a combination of these things. Reflecting the other person's emotions shows that you are paying close attention and putting energy into understanding what he or she is communicating.

Clarifying

Double-check any issue that is ambiguous or unclear. Open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions are important tools.

Open-ended questions draw people out and encourage them to expand their ideas. They allow you to uncover hidden issues. They also encourage people to reflect rather than justifying or defending a position or trying to guess the "right" answer. Open-ended questions can't be answered with a simple yes or no. Examples of open-ended questions include

"What are your thoughts on . . . ?"

"What led you to draw this conclusion?"

"What would happen next?"

Clarifying questions help ensure understanding and clear up confusion. They define problems, uncover gaps in information, and encourage accuracy and precision. Any *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how*, or *why* question can be a clarifying question, but these are not the only possibilities. For example:

"Let me see if I'm clear on what you're saying. Are you talking about . . . ?"

"I must have missed something. Could you repeat that?"

"I am not sure that I got what you were saying. Can you explain it again another way?"

Probing questions introduce new ideas or suggestions. They often highlight details and contain an element of challenge. By asking prob-

ing questions instead of telling others what to do, you invite reflection and a thoughtful response. This fosters ownership of decisions and outcomes and serves to develop problem-solving capacity in others. Examples of probing questions include

"More specifically, what are some of the things you have tried?"

"How direct have you been with the salesforce manager about the consequences for the salesforce if the situation doesn't change?"

"What is it in your leadership approach that might be contributing to her failure to meet her deadlines?"

Summarizing

Briefly restate core themes raised by the other person as the conversation proceeds. Summarizing helps people see their key themes and confirms and solidifies your grasp of their point of view. The summary does not necessarily imply that you agree or disagree; it merely allows you to close the loop. It may lead to additional questions as a transition to problem solving. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up.

Briefly summarize what you have understood as you listened. For example, you might say, "It sounds as if your main concern is . . ." or, "These seem to be the key points you have expressed . . ." In addition to—or instead of—doing the summarizing yourself, you may ask the other person to summarize:

"What have you heard so far?" or,

"To make sure we're on the same page, would you please summarize for both of us the key plans we've agreed upon today?"

Sharing

Being an active listener doesn't mean being a sponge, passively soaking up the information coming your way. You are an active party to the conver-

sation, with your own thoughts and feelings. Yet active listening is first about understanding the other person, then about being understood. That's hard for anyone to learn and apply. It may be especially hard for people in leadership roles, who may have been

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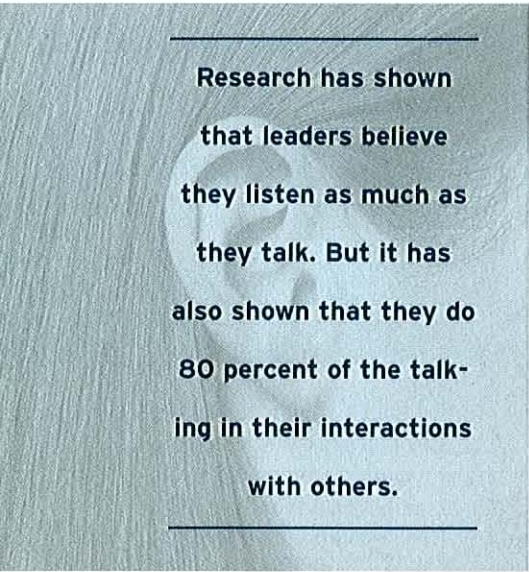
As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person's perspective, it's time to introduce your ideas, feelings, and suggestions and to address any concerns. It's time to share your view and to collaborate on solutions and next steps. For example, you might say, "Your telling me . . . triggered the thought that . . ." or, "I felt so happy when it became clear to me from what you said that I wasn't the only one feeling that way."

BLOCKING THE WAY

Most people would see some of the skills and behaviors associated with active listening—not interrupting, for example—as basic courtesy. But other active listening skills (such as asking clarifying questions) are less familiar and therefore may require teaching and practice. Leaders who seek to improve their ability to

actively listen may face a number of barriers, including these:

The image of leadership. The role of listening can seem to contradict common cultural notions of what a leader is. In a society that values leaders who are action oriented, charismatic, visionary, and directive, the expectation is that leaders should have all the answers, call all the shots, and do all the talking. The emphasis on the performance of leaders cuts into their abil-



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Silence as agreement. Listening quietly can also be confused with agreement with or acceptance of the other person's ideas and perspective. When leaders disagree or have additional ideas and information, they may be quick to debate or respond.

Active listening allows different viewpoints to be aired and assessed. It does not require you to discount or hold back your own opinion or objections; however, it does require allowing yourself sufficient time to learn, uncover assumptions, and seek clarity—all with an open mind.

External pressures. A volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment makes it tempting to not listen. The daily demands placed on leaders make it difficult to slow down, focus, and inquire. At the same time, one of the critical skills for dealing with uncertain conditions is the ability to actively solicit information and make sense of it. Communicating effectively—especially the ability to listen well—is a survival skill.

Lack of know-how. Listening is a neglected communication skill. Much of the emphasis in discussions of communication by leaders is on how they can effectively get their message out. Less emphasis is placed on ensuring that leaders accurately receive the messages of others.

Individual makeup. A leader's experience (whether she is accustomed to working collaboratively or independently, for example) and personality (such as whether she is action driven, impatient, talk oriented, or reserved) may also create barriers to effective active listening.

Time and place. Listening is particularly challenging when a leader isn't in the same room with those with whom he is working. Telephone calls and videoconferences are impersonal, nonverbal cues are missing, the technology may be distracting, and the lure of multitasking is strong. Active listening may be all the more important when leaders are routinely working with co-workers around the world.

Emotion. When people express strong feelings, it may be tempting to react quickly or passionately. It's better to use active listening to ease tensions, address conflict, and find common ground for solving problems. Low-grade emotions can also make it difficult to listen well. When a leader is negotiating with someone she doesn't respect, it can be a challenge to listen without judging and to be patient. Emotions are always going to play a role at work; a good leader is able to manage her feelings and help others to manage theirs.

Cultural differences. The way we work, communicate, and lead is deeply connected to our cultural backgrounds. Routine or natural behaviors can be misinterpreted and can create unexpected problems when we are working with people whose cultural backgrounds are different from ours. Similarly, ideas and techniques that leaders learn—including techniques of active listening—have some level of cultural bias. Although active listening may allow us to communicate better in culturally diverse settings, it is important to be mindful of our own assumptions and interpretations.

NOT OPTIONAL

Active listening can make a huge difference in leaders' interactions with others. Working relationships become more solid as they are based on trust, respect, and honesty. Leaders benefit from the depth of engagement and information that results; they can plan and proceed with greater insight and knowledge. Active listening is not an optional component of leadership; it is not a nicety to be used to make others feel good. It is a critical component of the tasks facing today's leaders. 